

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, & Public Lands

[parks](#) - - Rep. Joel Hefley, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6207 - - (202) 226-7736

Witness Statement

Statement of the Sierra Club
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HR.1461, Legislation to Amend the National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998
House Resources Committee,
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands
June 7, 2001

The Sierra Club, a non-profit organization with 700,000 members nationwide, appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony to the Subcommittee regarding HR.1461, legislation to Amend the National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998. Sierra Club strongly opposes HR. 1461 because it does not benefit the public or National Park resources and it would curtail or eventually terminate the Club's volunteer-led environmental education trips in the National Parks.

The Sierra Club's mission is to explore, enjoy and protect the wild places of the earth; to practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; to educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to use all lawful means to carry out these objectives. Thus the Club operates at local, national and international levels to promote and protect the environment, through volunteer leadership and with paid staff.

HR. 1461 rescinds a key provision of the National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998 that ensures a better balance of access in the National Parks by bona fide non-profit institutional groups and the use made by outfitter and guide concessionaires. The proposed legislation will not only impair the manner and scope of Sierra Club outdoor activities conducted in the National Parks, it will also damage or curtail activities of other groups operating children's, educational, and civic programs.

Over the years, institutional groups that make no taxable income from Park use have been increasingly required to use outfitter and guide concessionaires to access several National Parks. In other cases, these groups have had to compete with for-profit ventures for commercial use authorizations. The 1998 Act recognized that these groups provide a service to their members that is often unavailable from commercial ventures. In addition, these groups have the competence to guide their own trips without the need for the services of outfitter and guide concessionaires. These groups should not be denied access to the Parks or forced to pay for services that are not required.

I. SIERRA CLUB OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES OVERVIEW

In 2001, the Sierra Club is celebrating the Centennial of its outdoor activities program. A hundred years ago, at the request of John Muir, William Colby led one hundred Sierra Club members on a one-month trip in Yosemite that later became known as the "High Trip".

The Sierra Club now has three Outdoor Activities program areas: National/International Outings, Group/Chapter Outings, and Inner City Outings. All of these programs are integrally related to the mission of the Sierra Club -- to explore, enjoy and protect the wild places of the Earth. Beginning with John Muir and continuing throughout the Club's history, direct outdoor experience has motivated and prepared Club members to become advocates for wilderness preservation and environmental protection. As Muir said, "If people in general could be got out into the woods, even for once, to hear the trees speak for themselves, all difficulties in the way of forest preservation would vanish."

In general, the goal is to conduct outings on which participants:

- * have an enjoyable, consciousness-raising outdoor experience
- * learn about the conservation issues relating to the area visited and the Club's general conservation goals
- * learn new outdoor conduct and skills
- * increase their natural history awareness
- * experience a broad range of cultural values.

Outings are led by volunteer leaders and are conducted with a high regard for the safety of participants and ethical standards of land use.

National/International Outings. The program is conducted on a fiscally self-sustaining basis with trip prices set so that the program breaks even in the long-term. The program has about 700 active volunteers leading approximately 310 domestic and 40 international trips per year that provide an outdoor experience for about 4,000 Sierra Club members. Most trips are between one and two weeks in length, with approximately 150 trips in the National Parks, and another 50 trips on other federal lands. There is a small staff in the San Francisco headquarters that handle administrative duties such as answering member questions and taking reservations, publicizing trips, arranging volunteer leader training and travel, and paying trip expenses.

The National/International Outing program consists of four categories of trips that advance the mission of the Sierra Club in unique ways:

Domestic Trips. There are a variety of trips throughout the United States ranging from base camp (one location) and highlight trips (several locations with transportation provided between locations), to hard-core Sierra backpacks, to easy family trips. There are also specialty trips: women-oriented trips, age-specific trips, and singles trips.

Service Trips. Ever since the first service trip in 1958 to remove trail garbage in Kearsarge Pass in the southern Sierra Nevada, the Club's service trips program has become one of the pre-eminent wilderness restoration and public lands maintenance programs in the United States. Service trip participants build trails, repair damage from campers, survey and map fragile Native American archeological sites, and re-vegetate distressed areas.

Activist Trips. The activist trips take members to areas that the Sierra Club is working to protect and provide trip participants with the tools and inspiration to become advocates for those areas. Trip participants then return to their local communities to share their newly acquired skills, knowledge, and passion with other environmentalists and the general public.

International Trips. A variety of trips are conducted including trekking, rafting, alpine hiking, van

touring and naturalist excursions. International trip participants learn about the native cultures and fragile ecosystems while respecting local traditions.

Group/Chapter Outings. The program is conducted on a direct cost recovery basis (park entry fees, etc.) with many outings being free. The program has approximately 5,000 active volunteers leading approximately 20,000 outings serving several hundred thousand Sierra Club members and guests. Most trips are day trips and few are run on National Park and other federal lands. There is a staff of two in the San Francisco headquarters that handle administrative duties such as providing policy guidance, addressing risk management issues, assisting local programs in providing leader training and certification, and helping enhance the educational aspects.

Inner City Outings: The Inner City Outings (ICO) program is entirely grant funded through tax-deductible donations. ICO provides outdoor experiences for persons who might not otherwise have them, including low-income youth of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, hearing or visually impaired individuals, and the physically disabled. Currently, the 47 ICO groups provide about 1,000 outings per year, totaling 19,000 participant days. Only a few of these trips are run on federal lands. The goals of ICO are to:

- * promote personal development by linking cultures, fostering respect of self and others, and providing leadership skills
- * promote appreciation and protection of our local and global environments through a process of educating and sharing.

All of the different types of Sierra Club outings incur some level of overhead costs, in particular insurance, publicity, and logistical coordination. The Sierra Club Board of Directors has directed the Outings Department to recover these costs to the extent possible so that this vital program is not a drain on other Club activities or resources. Unfortunately, this is a difficult goal to achieve. In fiscal year 2000, for example, the audited financial statements of the Sierra Club indicate that the Outdoor Activities program had revenues of \$4.1 million and expenses of \$4.9 million; in 1999, revenues were 4.0 million and expenses were 4.4 million.

Despite the perception of some in the outdoor recreation industry, the Sierra Club does not generate a surplus from its outdoor activities that it uses to subsidize other programs. On the contrary, the opposite is true - general Club funds are used to subsidize this vital education program. The Sierra Club wants to expose our members to the natural world so that they will be inspired and take responsibility for its protection. That is why one-week backpacking trips are priced at \$450 and ten-day service trips at \$350. There is no surplus to be generated at these prices.

II. OPPOSITION TO HR. 1461

The National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998 challenged the assumption that all visitor services should be provided through either concessionaires or holders of commercial use authorizations. For non-profit institutional groups not deriving taxable income from their trips, the 1998 Act allows groups to provide their own guide services for their members. These groups have the competence to guide their own trips and do not need the services of concessionaires and guides - and should not be forced to pay for them.

When its provisions are implemented, the 1998 Act will remove the requirement that groups either compete with for-profit ventures for commercial use authorizations or, as is required in some Parks, use outfitter and

guide concessionaires in order gain access. These changes are good public policy. Unlike commercial outfitters, institutional groups, many relying on volunteer leadership, take many fewer trips involving far fewer visitors to the Parks. Institutional groups engage in educational and civic activities and do not compete with outfitters and guides concessionaires for commercial recreation users.

The Sierra Club is not looking for preferences - it is trying to avoid being either denied access to the National Parks or being forced to use outfitter or guide concessionaires. In reality, the 1998 Act does not confer a preference for institutional groups nor does the 1998 Act lead to misuse of resources. Non-profit institutional groups like the Sierra Club must still compete for wilderness permits and conduct its trips in accordance with land management plans and regulations. However, while the Club and other groups are not looking for preferences, we do want a fair allocation of any resource use that is allowed.III.

If HR. 1461 is implemented, various institutional groups which now use units of the National Park System would not be able to continue their patterns of use. These groups not only include various types of youth camps, but also outdoor organizations who typically organize and lead their own trips to many types of public land areas. Many of these groups work with the Park Service on visitor education. Some even conduct service trips to improve Park resources. It would be unfair to preclude these groups from continuing this type of use of the National Park System.

Accordingly, we urge you to reject HR. 1461 so that valuable children's, educational and civic programs conducted in our National Parks are not endangered.

We thank you for the opportunity to convey our views and look forward to working with the Subcommittee as it further considers HR. 1461.

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